

MESSAGE

FROM THE

PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES,

UPON

The subject of Fortifications

ON

DAUPHINE ISLAND AND MOBILE POINT.

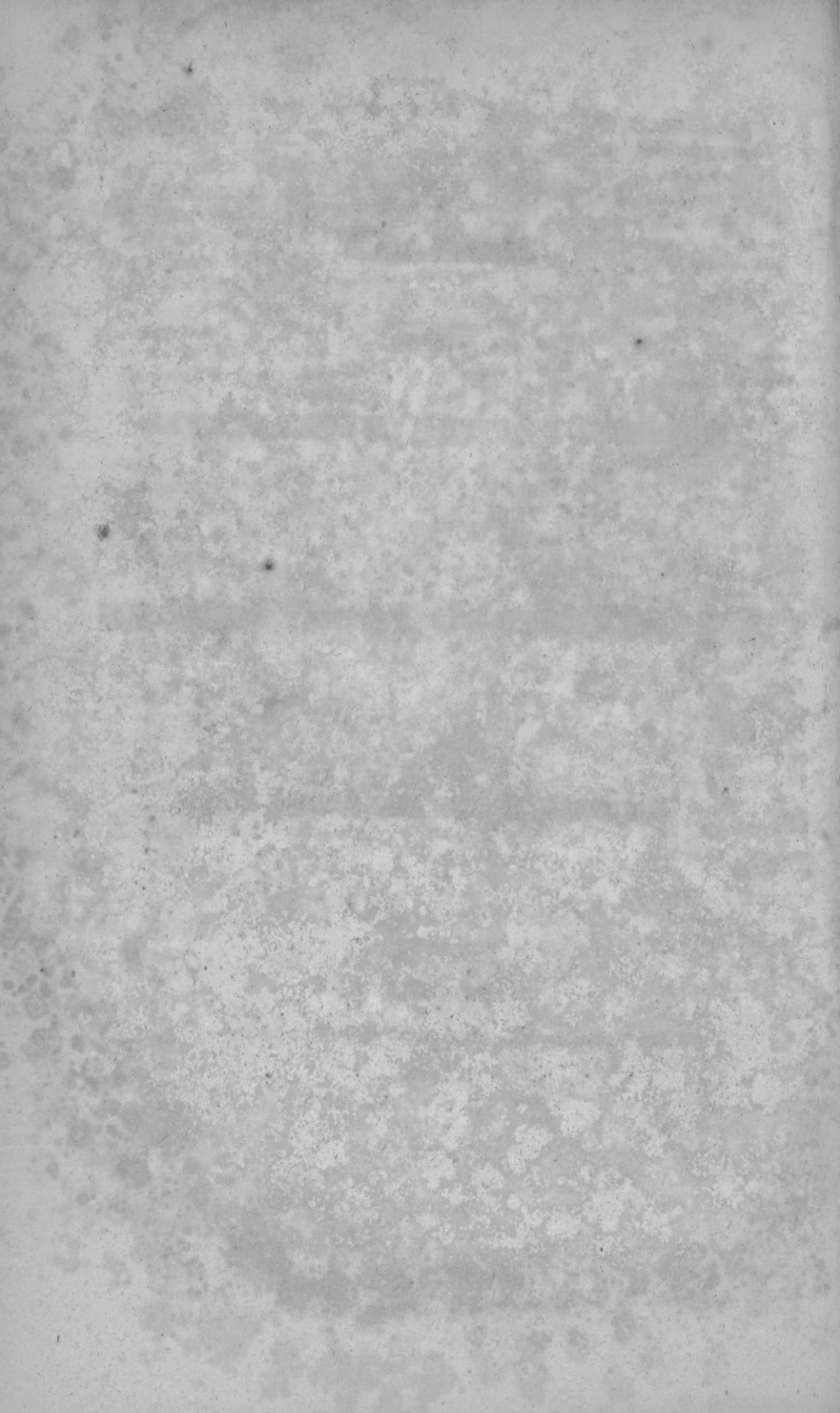
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MESSAGE.

TO THE SENATE AND

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE UNITED STATES:

Congress having suspended the appropriation at the last session for the fortification at Dauphine Island, in consequence of a doubt which was entertained of the propriety of that position, the further prosecution of the work was suspended, and an order given, as intimated in the message of the 3rd of December, to the Board of Engineers and Naval Commissioners, to examine that part of the coast, and particularly that position, as also the position at Mobile Point, with which it is connected, and to report their opinion thereon, which has been done, and which report is herewith communicated.

By this report, it appears to be still the opinion of the Board, that the construction of works at both these positions, is of great importance to the defence of New Orleans, and of all that portion of our Union which is connected with, and dependant on, the Mississippi, and on the other waters which empty into the Gulf of Mexico, between that river and Cape Florida. That the subject may be fully before Congress, I transmit, also, a copy of the former report of the Board, being that on which the work was undertaken, and has been, in part, executed. Approving, as I do, the opinion of the Board, I consider it my duty to state the reasons, on which I adopted the first report, especially, as they were in part suggested by the occurrences of the late war.

The policy which induced Congress to decide on and provide for the defence of the coast immediately after the war, was founded on the marked events of that interesting epoch. The vast body of men which it was found necessary to call into the field, through the whole extent of our maritime frontier, and the number who perished by exposure, with the immense expenditure of money and waste of property which followed, were to be traced in an eminent degree to the defenceless condition of the coast. It was to mitigate these evils, in future wars, and even for the higher purpose of preventing war itself, that the decision was formed to make the coast, so far as it might be practicable, impregnable, and that the measures necessary to that great object have been pursued with so much zeal since.

It is known that no part of our Union is more exposed to invasion by the numerous avenues leading to it; or more defenceless by the thinness of the neighboring population; or offers a greater temptation to invasion, either as a permanent acquisition, or as a prize to the

cupidity of grasping invaders, from the immense amount of produce deposited there, than the city of New Orleans. It is known, also, that the seizure of no part of our Union could affect so deeply and vitally the immediate interests of so many states, and of so many of our fellow-citizens, comprising all that extensive territory, and numerous population, which are connected with, and dependant on, the Mississippi, as the seizure of that city. Strong works well posted were therefore deemed absolutely necessary for its protection.

It is not, however, by the Mississippi only, or the waters which communicate directly with, or approach nearest to, New Orleans, that the town is assailable. It will be recollected, that, in the late war, the public solicitude was excited, not so much by the danger which menaced it in those directions, as by the apprehension that, while a feint might be made there, the main force, landing either in the Bay of Mobile, or other waters between that bay and the Rigolets, would be thrown above the town, in the rear of the army which had been collected there for its defence. Full confidence was entertained, that that gallant army, led by the gallant and able chief who commanded it, would repel any attack to which it might be exposed in front. But, had such a force been thrown above the town, and a position taken on the banks of the river, the disadvantage to which our troops would have been subjected, attacked in front and rear, as they might have been, may easily be conceived. As their supplies would have been cut off, they could not long have remained in the city, and withdrawing from it, it must have fallen immediately into the hands of the force below. In ascending the river to attack the force above, the attack must have been made to great disadvantage, since it must have been on such ground, and at such time, as the enemy preferred. These considerations shew, that defences, other than such as are immediately connected with the city, are of great importance to its safety.

An attempt to seize New Orleans, and the lower part of the Mississippi, will be made only by a great power, or a combination of several powers, with a strong naval and land force, the latter of which must be brought in transports which may sail in shallow water. If the defences around New Orleans are well posted, and of sufficient strength to repel any attack which may be made on them, the city can be assailed only by a land force, which must pass in the direction above suggested, between the Rigolets and the Bay of Mobile. It becomes, therefore, an object of high importance to present such an obstacle to such an attempt, as would defeat it should it be made. Fortifications are useful for the defence of posts; to prevent the approach to cities, and the passage of rivers, but as works, their effect cannot be felt beyond the reach of their cannon. They are formidable in other respects, by the body of men within them, which may be removed and applied to other purposes.

Between the Rigolets and the Bay of Mobile, there is a chain of islands, at the extremity of which is Dauphine Island, which forms, with Mobile Point, from which it is distant about $3\frac{1}{2}$ miles, the en-

trance into the Bay of Mobile, which leads through that part of the state of Alabama to the towns of Mobile and Blakeley. The distance between Dauphine Island and the Rigolets, is 90 miles. The principal islands between them are Massacre, Horn, Ship, and Cat island, near to which, there is anchorage for large ships of war. The first object is, to prevent the landing of any force, for the purposes above stated, between the Rigolets and the Bay of Mobile; the second, to defeat that force in case it should be landed. When the distance from one point to the other is considered, it is believed, that it would be impossible to establish works so near to each other, as to prevent the landing of such a force. Its defeat, therefore, should be effectually provided for. If the arrangement should be such, as to make that result evident, it ought to be fairly concluded, that the attempt would not be made, and thus we should accomplish, in the best mode possible, and with the least expense, the complete security of this important part of our Union, the great object of our system of defence for the whole.

There are some other views of this subject, which, it is thought, will merit particular attention, in deciding the point in question. Not being able to establish a chain of posts, at least for the present, along the whole coast, from the Rigolets to Dauphine Island, or on all the Islands between them, at which point shall we begin? Should an attack on the city be anticipated, it cannot be doubted, that an adequate force would immediately be ordered there for its defence. If the enemy should despair of making an impression on the works near the town, it may be presumed that they would promptly decide to make the attempt in the manner, and in the line above suggested, between the Rigolets and the Bay of Mobile. It will be obvious that the nearer the fortification is erected to the Rigolets, with a view to this object, should it be on Cat or Ship Island for example, the wider would the passage be left open between that work and the Bay of Mobile, for such an enterprise. The main army being drawn to New-Orleans, would be ready to meet such an attempt near the Rigolets, or at any other point not distant from the city. It is probable, therefore, that the enemy, profiting of a fair wind, would make his attempt at the greatest distance compatible with his object, from that point and at the Bay of Mobile, should there not be works there of sufficient strength to prevent it. Should, however, strong works be erected there, such as were sufficient not only for their own defence against any attack, which might be made on them, but to hold a force connected with that, which might be drawn from the neighbouring country, capable of co-operating with the force at the city, and which would doubtless be ordered to those works in the event of war; it would be dangerous for the invading force to land any where between the Rigolets and the Bay of Mobile, and to pass towards the Mississippi above the city, lest such a body might be thrown in its rear as to cut off its retreat. These considerations show the great advantage of establishing at the mouth of the Bay of Mobile, very strong works, such as would be adequate to all the purposes suggested.

If fortifications were necessary, only to protect our country and cities against the entry of large ships of war into our bays and rivers, they would be of little use for the defence of New Orleans, since that city cannot be approached so near, either by the Mississippi or in any other direction, by such vessels, for them to make an attack on it. In the Gulf, within our limits west of Florida, which had been acquired, since these works were decided on and commenced, there is no bay or river, into which large ships of war can enter. As a defence, therefore, against an attack from such vessels, extensive works would be altogether unnecessary, either at Mobile Point or at Dauphine Island, since sloops of war, only, can navigate the deepest channel. But it is not for that purpose alone that these works are intended. It is to provide also against a formidable invasion, both by land and sea, the object of which may be, to shake the foundation of our system. Should such small works be erected, and such an invasion take place, they would be sure to fall at once into the hands of the invaders, and to be turned against us.

Whether the acquisition of Florida may be considered as affording an inducement to make any change in the position or strength of these works, is a circumstance which also merits attention. From the view which I have taken of the subject, I am of opinion that it should not. The defence of New-Orleans, and of the river Mississippi, against a powerful invasion, being one of the great objects of such extensive works, that object would be essentially abandoned, if they should be established eastward of the Bay of Mobile, since the force to be collected in them would be placed at too great a distance to allow the co-operation necessary for those purposes, between it and that at the city. In addition to which, it may be observed, that, by carrying them to Pensacola, or further to the east, that Bay would fall immediately, in case of such invasion, into the hands of the enemy, whereby such co-operation would be rendered utterly impossible, and the state of Alabama would also be left wholly unprotected.

With a view to such formidable invasion of which we should never lose sight, and of the great objects to which it would be directed, I think that very strong works at some point within the Gulf of Mexico will be found indispensable. I think, also, that those works ought to be established at the Bay of Mobile, one at Mobile Point, and the other on Dauphine Island, whereby the enemy would be excluded, and the complete command of that bay, with all the advantages attending it, be secured to ourselves. In the case of such invasion, it will, it is presumed, be deemed necessary to collect, at some point, other than at New Orleans, a strong force, capable of moving in any direction, and affording aid to any part which may be attacked, and, in my judgment, no position presents so many advantages, as a point of rendezvous for such force, as the mouth of that bay. The fortification at the Rigolets will defend the entrance by one passage into Lake Pontchartrain, and, also, into Pearl river, which empties into the Gulf at that point. Between the Rigolets and Mobile Bay, there

are but two inlets which deserve the name, those of St. Louis and Pascagola, the entrance into which is too shallow, even for the smallest vessels; and from the Rigolets to Mobile Bay, the whole coast is equally shallow, affording the depth of a few feet of water only. Cat Island, which is nearest the Rigolets, is about seven and a half miles distant from the coast, and thirty from the Rigolets. Ship Island is distant about ten miles from Cat Island and twelve from the coast. Between these islands and the coast, the water is very shallow. As to the precise depth of water in approaching those islands from the Gulf, the report of the Topographical Engineers not having yet been received, it is impossible to speak with precision, but admitting it to be such as for frigates, and even ships of the line to enter, the anchorage at both is unsafe, being much exposed to northwest winds. Along the coast, therefore, there is no motive for such strong works on our part; no town to guard; no inlet into the country to defend; and if placed on the islands, and the entrance to them is such as to admit large ships of war, distant as they are from the coast, it would be more easy for the enemy to assail them with effect.

The position, however, at Mobile Bay is essentially different. That bay takes its name from the Mobile river, which is formed by the junction of the Alabama and Tombigbee, which extend, each, about 300 miles into the interior, approaching, at their head waters, near the Tennessee river. If the enemy possessed its mouth, and fortified Mobile Point and Dauphine Island, being superior at sea, it would be very difficult for us to dispossess him of either, even of Mobile Point; and holding that position, Pensacola would soon fall, as, without incurring great expense in the construction of works there, it would present but a feeble resistance to a strong force in its rear. If we had a work at Mobile Point only, the enemy might take Dauphine Island, which would afford him great aid in attacking the Point, and enable him, even should we succeed in repelling the attack, to render us great mischief there, and throughout the whole Gulf. In every view which can be taken of the subject, it appears indispensable for us to command the entrance into Mobile Bay, and that decision being taken, I think the considerations which favor the occupation of Dauphine Island, by a strong work, are conclusive. It is proper to observe, that, after the repulse before New Orleans, in the late war, the British forces took possession of Dauphine Island, and held it till the peace. Under neither of the reports of the Board of Engineers and Naval Commissioners could any but sloops of war enter the Bay, or the anchorage between Dauphine and Pelican Islands. Both reports give to that anchorage eighteen feet at low water, and twenty and a half at high. The only difference between them consists in this: that, in the first, a bar, leading to the anchorage, reducing the depth of water to twelve feet at low tide, was omitted. In neither case could frigates enter, though sloops of war of larger size might. The whole scope, however, of this reasoning turns on a different principle—on the works necessary to defend that bay, and, by means thereof, New Orleans, the Mississippi, and all

the surrounding country, against a powerful invasion both by land and sea, and not on the precise depth of water in any of the approaches to the bay or to the island.

The reasoning which is applicable to the works near New Orleans, and at the bay of Mobile, is equally so, in certain respects, to those which are to be erected for the defence of all the bays and rivers along the other parts of the coast. All those works are also erected on a greater scale than would be necessary for the sole purpose of preventing the passage of our inlets, by large ships of war. They are, in most instances, formed for defence, against a more powerful invasion, both by land and sea. There are, however, some differences between the works which are deemed necessary in the Gulf, and those in other parts of our Union, founded on the peculiar situation of that part of the coast. The vast extent of the Mississippi, the great outlet and channel of commerce for so many states, all of which may be affected by the seizure of that city, or of any part of the river, to a great extent above it, is one of those striking peculiarities which require particular provision. The thinness of the population near the city, making it necessary that the force requisite for its defence should be called from distant parts, and states, is another. The danger which the army assembled at New Orleans would be exposed to, of being cut off in case the enemy should throw a force on the river above it, from the difficulty of ascending the river to attack it, and of making a retreat in any other direction, is a third. For an attack on the city of New Orleans, Mobile Bay, or any part of the intermediate coast, ships of war would be necessary, only, as a convoy to protect the transports against a naval force on their passage, and on their approach to the shore, for the landing of the men, and on their return home, in case they should be repulsed.

On the important subject of our defences generally, I think proper to observe, that the system was adopted immediately after the late war, by Congress, on great consideration and a thorough knowledge of the effects of that war; by the enormous expense attending it; by the waste of life, of property, and by the general distress of the country. The amount of debt incurred in that war, and due at its conclusion, without taking into the estimate other losses, having been heretofore communicated, need not now be repeated. The interest of the debt thus incurred, is four times more than the sum necessary by annual appropriations, for the completion of our whole system of defence, land and naval, to the extent provided for, and within the time specified. When that system shall be completed, the expense of construction will cease, and our expenditures be proportionally diminished. Should another war occur before it is completed, the experience of the last marks in characters too strong to be mistaken, its inevitable consequences; and should such war occur, and find us unprepared for it, what will be our justification to the enlightened body whom we represent, for not having completed these defences. That this system should not have been adopted before the late war cannot be a cause of surprise to any one, because all might

wish to avoid every expense, the necessity of which might be, in any degree, doubtful. But with the experience of that war before us, it is thought there is no cause for hesitation. Will the completion of these works, and the augmentation of our navy, to the point contemplated by law, require the imposition of onerous burthens on our fellow-citizens, such as they cannot, or will not bear? Have such, or any burthens been imposed, to advance the system to its present state? It is known that no burthens whatever have been imposed; on the contrary, that all the direct or internal taxes have been long repealed, and none paid but those which are indirect and voluntary, such as are imposed on articles imported from foreign countries, most of which are luxuries, and on the vessels employed in the transportation—taxes, which some of our most enlightened citizens think ought to be imposed on many of the articles, for the encouragement of our manufactures, even if the revenue derived from them could be dispensed with. It is known, also, that, in all other respects, our condition as a nation is, in the highest degree, prosperous and flourishing, nearly half the debt incurred in the late war having already been discharged, and considerable progress having also been made in the completion of this system of defence, and in the construction of other works of great extent and utility, by the revenue derived from these sources, and from the sale of the public lands. I may add, also, that a very generous provision has been made, from the same sources, for the surviving officers and soldiers of our Revolutionary army. These important facts show, that this system has been so far executed, and may be completed, without any real inconvenience to the public. Were it, however, otherwise, I have full confidence that any burthens, which might be found necessary for the completion of this system, in both its branches, within the term contemplated, or much sooner, should any emergency require it, would be called for, rather than complained of, by our fellow-citizens.

From these views, applicable to the very important subject of our defences generally, as well as to the work at Dauphine Island, I think it my duty to recommend to Congress an appropriation for the latter. I considered the withholding it, at the last session, as the expression only of a doubt, by Congress, of the propriety of the position, and not as a definitive opinion. Supposing that that question would be decided at the present session, I caused the position, and such parts of the coast as are particularly connected with it, to be re-examined, that all the light, on which the decision, as to the appropriation, could depend, might be fully before you. In the first survey, the report of which was that on which the works, intended for the defence of New Orleans, the Mississippi, the Bay of Mobile, and all the country dependant on those waters, were sanctioned by the Executive, the Commissioners were industriously engaged about six months. I should have communicated that very able and interesting document, then, but from a doubt how far the interest of our country would justify its publication, a circumstance which I now mention, that the attention of Congress may be drawn to it.

JAMES MONROE.

Washington, March 26, 1822.

